

Land, Power, and Reputation: The Cultural Dimension of Politics in the Ohio Country

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HISTORIANS of the Northwest Territory have long recognized that the interaction of settlers from throughout the eastern United States was central to the formation of the territory's social character. Indeed, white American society in the territory—which in the 1790s was limited largely to the river valleys of the Ohio Country—consisted of migrants from regions as culturally distinct as New England and Virginia. Observers from Crèvecoeur to Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick have argued that the demands of frontier life quickly dissolved these distinctions into a more or less homogeneous society. An examination of the cultural dimension of territorial politics suggests, however, that the settlement of the Ohio Country intensified rather than weakened cultural differences.¹

Contemporary travelers noted a sequence of quite discrete settlements along the Ohio and up its tributaries. From east to west, moving

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¹ Elkins and McKittrick, "A Meaning for Turner's Frontier (Part One): Democracy in the Old Northwest," *Political Science Quarterly*, LXIX (1954), 321-353. Several scholars have argued for seeing the settlement of the Ohio Valley and the Old Northwest as a contest between Southerners and New Englanders. See, for example, Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of Sections in American History* (New York, 1932), iii, 27; John D. Barnhart, *Valley of Democracy: The Frontier versus the Plantation in the Ohio Valley, 1775-1818* (Bloomington, Ind., 1953); Beverley W. Bond, Jr., *The Civilization of the Old Northwest: A Study of Political, Social, and Economic Development, 1788-1812* (New York, 1934); Richard Lyle Power, *Planting Corn Belt Culture: The Impress of the Upland Southerner and Yankee in the Old Northwest* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1953); Richard Jensen, "On Modernizing Frederick Jackson Turner: The Historiography of Regionalism," *Western Historical Quarterly*, XI (1980), 311-316; and James M. Bergquist, "Tracing the Origins of a Midwestern Culture: The Case of Central Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History*, LXXVII (1981), 1-31.

downriver, these included the area west of the Ohio River near present-day Steubenville, which was settled primarily by people from the Pennsylvania and Virginia backcountry; the Muskingum River valley (Washington County), dominated by the town of Marietta, which was founded in 1788 by the mainly New England-born veterans of the American Revolution organized in the Ohio Company of Associates; the Scioto River valley (Adams and Ross counties), whose leading settlers were Virginians and Kentuckians taking advantage of the land set aside in the Virginia Military Tract for Revolutionary War veterans; and the Miami River valley and Cincinnati area (Hamilton County), which, although it had many settlers from New Jersey and Pennsylvania, was the only part of the territory with a heterogeneous white population—the result, to some extent, of the army being stationed at Cincinnati.²

In their diversity, these local societies paralleled the range of the new nation's regions. What made their differences salient was the creation of territory-wide political structures under the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 in a pattern similar to the formation of a national government under the Constitution. That process began with the arrival of Gov. Arthur St. Clair at Marietta in 1788 and climaxed in the achievement of statehood for Ohio in 1803. The dominant motifs in this political struggle were recurrent clashes between the region-based cultures of the territory's scattered settlements and—more important for the present purpose—the emergence of hostility between territorial officials and the powerful settler-speculators who first took possession of the Virginia Military Tract. The latter conflict commenced in a dispute over the location of a county seat and ended in a flood tide of exaggerated but sincere democratic rhetoric.

Historians have profitably studied the origins of politics in the Northwest Territory from a variety of angles. Turnerians described them in terms of the rise of frontier democracy.³ Others have pointed out the importance of regional and personal interests⁴ or have placed the creation of Ohio in the context of the grand national debate about republican government.⁵ The following analysis builds on this literature by placing

² Bond, *Civilization of the Old Northwest*, describes these settlements at length. See also Beverley W. Bond, Jr., *The Foundations of Ohio* (Columbus, Ohio, 1941), 275-395. An excellent introduction to the West in the early republic is Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *The Trans-Appalachian Frontier: Peoples, Societies, and Institutions, 1775-1850* (New York, 1978).

³ Randolph Chandler Downes, *Frontier Ohio, 1788-1803* (Columbus, Ohio, 1935); Barnhart, *Valley of Democracy*; Bond, *Foundations of Ohio*.

⁴ Jeffrey P. Brown, "Frontier Politics: The Evolution of a Political Society in Ohio, 1788-1814" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1979), stresses the importance of regional rivalries.

⁵ Discussions of the issues within the limited context of republicanism include Andrew R. L. Cayton, *The Frontier Republic: Ideology and Politics in the Ohio Country, 1780-1825* (Kent, Ohio, 1986), 51-80; Donald J. Ratcliffe, "The Experience of Revolution and the Beginnings of Party Politics in Ohio, 1776-1816," *Ohio History*, LXXXV (1976), 186-230; and Peter S. Onuf, "From Constitution to Higher Law: The Reinterpretation of the Northwest Ordinance," *ibid.*, XCIV

the participants' behavior and rhetoric in a larger cultural context. It tries to demonstrate that the political squabbles in the Northwest Territory in the 1790s boiled down to a conflict between alternative ways of organizing society, ways that originated less in "frontier conditions" or republican ideology than in the disparate cultures in which the participants matured.

To contemporaries, the contest over the location of the seat of justice for Adams County, which sparked a power struggle leading to the creation of the state of Ohio, was very serious business indeed. Territorial secretary Winthrop Sargent, acting in the absence of Governor St. Clair, created Adams County in July 1797 in response to the great influx of people into the Virginia Military Tract. Today, Adams County consists of 586 square miles of hilly land located along the Ohio River about fifty miles east of Cincinnati. In 1797 it encompassed a much larger area, running north from the river for over one hundred miles and over fifty miles wide from the border of Washington County, with its seat at Marietta, to that of Hamilton County, centered on Cincinnati. The jurisdiction was the fourth county created in what became Ohio.⁶

Following St. Clair's practice of appointing local men of property and influence to office, Sargent made Nathaniel Massie, the largest landowner in the region, the lieutenant-colonel of the Adams County militia. He also appointed Massie and several of his friends, including recent arrival Thomas Worthington, as justices of the peace.⁷ Under the Northwest Ordinance, the judges of the County Courts of Quarter-Sessions of the Peace held extremely broad powers. Appointed by the governor, they in turn appointed all local officials, divided counties into townships, supervised poor relief and the building of new roads, granted licenses to owners of ferries, tavernkeepers, and traders, and regulated taxation.⁸

The one thing Sargent did not do was to select the site of the county seat, pleading ignorance because of the failure of Massie to send him a sketch of the area. Still, "I have so much Confidence in you Gentlemen," Sargent wrote to the new justices, "that I shall confirm your" choice of a location—with three exceptions, namely, the towns of Manchester and

(1985), 5-33. For differing perspectives on the role of the West in national politics see Peter S. Onuf, *Statehood and Union: A History of the Northwest Ordinance* (Bloomington, Ind., 1987), and Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution* (New York, 1986).

⁶ Randolph Chandler Downes, "Evolution of Ohio County Boundaries," *Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Quarterly*. XXXVI (1927), 355.

⁷ "Journal of Executive Proceedings of the Territory Northwest of the River Ohio," July 11, 1797, in Clarence Edwin Carter, ed., *The Territorial Papers of the United States*. 26 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1934), III, 472-473. See the brief summary of events in Nelson W. Evans and E. B. Stivers, *A History of Adams County, Ohio, from Its Earliest Settlement to the Present Time* (West Union, Ohio, 1900), 87-90. In 1804 the county seat was permanently fixed at West Union.

⁸ Downes, *Frontier Ohio*. 149-151. See also Jack Ericson Eblen, *The First and Second United States Empires: Governors and Territorial Government, 1784-1912* (Pittsburgh, Pa., 1968), 114-137.

Chillicothe, and a tract of land owned by another judge.⁹ Massie had established both Manchester and Chillicothe as centers for the development of his land speculations. Manchester, on the Ohio River not far from Maysville, Kentucky, was founded in 1791. Chillicothe, located on the Scioto River about fifty miles above the Ohio, was only two years old in 1797. Massie clearly wanted the seat of justice for Manchester because it would bring increased prestige and business to his town.

But Sargent, unwilling to act in a way that would so obviously benefit a private speculator, refused to go along. In December 1797 he proclaimed Adamsville—an isolated location soon derisively labeled “Scantville” because of its small population—the seat of Adams County.¹⁰ The decision did not sit well with Massie and several other county justices. In June 1798 they voted to establish the seat at Manchester and held court there.

St. Clair, now back in the territory, strenuously objected to this action as “contrary to every principle of good order” and “a most unwarrantable assumption of power and contempt of authority by the justices.” He refused to provide funds for the erection of public buildings in Manchester and declared that the Ordinance of 1787 gave him alone the power to determine the seat of justice. The reason was clear: “In the situation of a county town a Governor can have no private interest of his own to serve, but it is very possible that even a majority of persons who may have been appointed justices may have such interests, and be disposed to prefer them to those of the public at large.”¹¹

In September the governor, conceding that Adamsville was not a convenient location, moved the county seat to Washington, a new settlement at the mouth of Brush Creek on the Scioto River.¹² When Massie and another judge tried to hold court in Manchester, St. Clair on October 29, 1798, revoked their commissions for “having Misdemeaned themselves in the execution of their office by attempting to disturb the regular administration of Justice.”¹³

The governor's actions raised an outcry from local officials in Adams County (and Ross County, created from the northern two-thirds of Adams in August 1798), and when the first territorial legislature met in 1799, the representatives from the Scioto Valley (that is, Adams and Ross counties), who included Worthington and his brother-in-law Edward Tiffin, moved

⁹ Winthrop Sargent to Nathaniel Massie and others, Sept. 1, 1797, in Carter, ed., *Territorial Papers*, III, 484-485.

¹⁰ “Executive Proceedings,” Dec. 26, 1797, *ibid.*, 494-495.

¹¹ St. Clair to Nathaniel Massie and other justices of Adams County, June 29, 1798, in William Henry Smith [ed.], *The St. Clair Papers: The Life and Public Services of Arthur St. Clair* . . . , 2 vols. (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1882), II, 425-426. Massie called the governor's letter “a pill for us to digest” in Massie to Worthington, July 13, 1798, Thomas Worthington Papers, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio.

¹² “Executive Proceedings,” Sept. 3, 1798, in Carter, ed., *Territorial Papers*, III, 513.

¹³ “Executive Proceedings,” Oct. 29, 1798, *ibid.*, 515-516.

quickly to make the positions of those officials secure. They obtained a law declaring Manchester the county seat along with several other acts increasing the power of county officers.¹⁴ St. Clair, in an ideologically consistent but politically stupid move, then vetoed eleven pieces of legislation, including the Manchester act. He contended that "the removal of seats of justice on light suggestions tends to introduce amongst the people a spirit of discontent, love of innovation, and of cabal and intrigue, destructive of public tranquillity, and a preference of private interest to every other consideration"—in short, social anarchy as he defined it.¹⁵

The vetoes brought the growing tension between the governor and the Scioto Valley gentry to a head. The issue of county government was debated again in the legislative session of 1800. But even before the lawmakers met, Massie, Worthington, and Tiffin had become the principal figures in building a territory-wide political coalition and lobbying network that in 1803 would achieve statehood for Ohio. They repeatedly accused St. Clair of being tyrannical, arbitrary, and corrupt, focusing particularly on his alleged infringements on the powers of local officials. They maintained that he meant to rule the Northwest Territory like a tyrant, in a British style entirely inappropriate to the new American republic.¹⁶

Since only the president could dismiss a territorial governor, in early 1802 Worthington submitted to Thomas Jefferson a list of ten charges detailing St. Clair's failings. Several of the charges centered on the dispute over who controlled the administration of county courts. These included the governor's alleged usurpation of "legislative powers by the erection of courts and location of Seats of justice," his vetoes of acts to locate county seats, and his supposed effort "arbitrarily to influence and controul the proceedings of the judiciary," not least by revoking and effecting "a surrender of the Commissions of those who have refused to bend to his will."¹⁷

When Jefferson refused to dismiss St. Clair from office, the governor's opponents put their energies into their already well-established drive for statehood. In the campaign, Worthington and Tiffin equated statehood with the triumph of local sovereignty over a tyrannical territorial government intent on imposing its will without respect to the popular will. Ironically, however, it was Congress, acting under the Northwest Ordinance, that passed legislation, in 1802, allowing Ohio to become the seventeenth state the following year. Still, the leaders of the statehood movement sought to ensure the supremacy of local authority by writing a

¹⁴ Downes, *Frontier Ohio*, 177-252; Alfred Byron Sears, *Thomas Worthington: Father of Ohio Statehood* (Columbus, Ohio, 1958), 48-52.

¹⁵ Arthur St. Clair to the Legislature on the Day of Their Adjournment, Dec. 19, 1799, in Smith [ed.], *St. Clair Papers*, II, 478.

¹⁶ Sears, *Worthington*, 79-81.

¹⁷ "Charges exhibited to the President of the United States against Arthur St. Clair Esquire as Governor of the Territory of the United States North West of the River Ohio," Feb. 20, 1802, in Carter, ed., *Territorial Papers*, III, 212-213.

constitution that in its provisions for a weak executive and judiciary and a strong legislature was the antithesis of the nationally appointed territorial government.

But the question remains: why there was such controversy over a county seat in the first place? Historians have tended to answer either that Massie, Worthington, and their allies were self-interested land speculators or that they were proponents of frontier democracy. Obviously, Worthington and Massie had strong economic reasons for wanting to control the location of the county seat. No one can deny that. Similarly, the rhetoric of the statehood movement was so overwrought that it is impossible to take it seriously on a literal level. But what we do have to take seriously is the relationship between economic interests (land speculation, in this case) and political rhetoric (democratic, here). Rather than seeing one as contradicting or invalidating the other, we might more profitably explore the ways, if any, in which the two were tied together. Put another way, why did such self-interested men as Worthington and Massie elect to assert their interests in the language of egalitarian democracy? Why did they choose the rhetorical strategies and political institutions that they did? How did what amounted to an interrelated oligarchy intent on personal aggrandizement become the great sponsors of white manhood suffrage and self-government?

Answers to such questions must be sought by asking, to begin with, who the participants were, where they came from, and what they thought about how a society ought to function. In other words, if we are going to understand why St. Clair and Worthington came to detest each other so much, we need to know about what had made them who they were in 1797. What is most striking is that St. Clair and his supporters were men whose ties to a particular regional society in the East were weak while many of the governor's leading opponents were products of a specific place—Virginia.

The lives of Arthur St. Clair and Winthrop Sargent illustrate the ways in which their careers and those of their supporters transcended a particular local region. St. Clair was born in Scotland in 1734. As an ensign in the Royal American Foot he served at the siege of Louisbourg and the Battle of Quebec with distinction and was promoted to lieutenant. He married Phoebe Bayard, half-sister of James Bowdoin of Massachusetts (her dowry of £14,000 amounted to a small fortune), and resigned from the army in 1762. From 1764 until the outbreak of the War for Independence, St. Clair lived in western Pennsylvania near Pittsburgh. He owned a large estate and a gristmill; he was appointed a justice of the Court of Quarter-Sessions in Westmoreland County. During the Revolution he rose to the rank of major general. His evacuation of Fort Ticonderoga during John Burgoyne's campaign in 1777 brought him much criticism, although he was exonerated by a general court-martial. For the rest of the war St. Clair served with George Washington's army. In the 1780s he became heavily involved in Pennsylvania politics and cast a covetous eye

on higher national office. Throughout the 1790s he attempted to maneuver himself into positions of national prominence. In 1797, in short, the governor of the Northwest Territory was a man of national experience and ambition who was personally and professionally committed to the supremacy of the government of the United States.¹⁸

So, too, was territorial secretary Winthrop Sargent. He was born in 1755 to a distinguished Gloucester, Massachusetts, family, graduated from Harvard College in 1771, traveled to Europe and the West Indies, and joined the American army as a volunteer in July 1775. Commissioned a lieutenant the next year, he saw action under Washington in the New York campaign of 1776 and the battles around Philadelphia in 1777. After 1778, Sargent served at West Point for the balance of the war. Promoted to major shortly before the Treaty of Paris, he received a strong written recommendation from Washington.

In the 1780s Sargent was at loose ends. Thirty years old in 1785, he was a man without a vocation or a home in which he felt comfortable. Like other veteran officers, he found work as a United States surveyor. While laying out the lines of the Seven Ranges at the eastern edge of the Northwest Territory in 1786, Sargent indulged in a bitter anger so common to former officers, denouncing the character of Americans and the failings of the Confederation government. He was an eager participant in the Ohio Company speculative venture, obtaining the post of company secretary and traveling to New York with director Manasseh Cutler to negotiate the purchase of land from Congress in 1787. Later in the year, his military connections helped him land the post of secretary of the Northwest Territory, in which capacity he acted as governor during St. Clair's frequent absences.¹⁹

From the beginning, Sargent was a rigid defender of national sovereignty. He firmly believed that "the Government of the United States is most congenial to the dignity of human Nature, and the best Possible Palladium for the Lives and Property of Mankind."²⁰ In 1790 he refused to accede to the request of territorial judges to allow local communities to make laws respecting local interests, arguing that such power could not be "delegated . . . either to a Set of Men of our own choosing or, that may be publicly elected in Town Meetings." To do so would risk placing power "in the Hands of designing or ignorant Men [and] produce a Multitude of Evils & be made Use of as a Sanction to very mischievous Purposes."²¹

Sargent's strict legalism and what a critic called his "phlegmatic and

¹⁸ Smith [ed.], *St. Clair Papers*, I, *passim*.

¹⁹ Benjamin H. Pershing, "Winthrop Sargent: A Builder in the Old Northwest" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1927). See also George B. Toulmin, "The Political Ideas of Winthrop Sargent, a New England Federalist on the Frontier," *Journal of Mississippi History*, XV (1953), 207-229.

²⁰ Sargent to Antoine Gameline and others, July 23, 1790, in Carter, ed., *Territorial Papers*, II, 292-293.

²¹ Sargent to the judges, July 25, 1790, *ibid.*, III, 322-323.

austere disposition"²² made him extremely unpopular not only in Ohio but during his subsequent tenure as governor of the Mississippi Territory (1798-1801), which was little short of a disaster. He openly rejected democratic rhetoric, claiming in 1800 that "no man . . . more ardently desires the approbation of the Wise and the Good . . . but I shall never be so far Degraded, as to become the Machine of the Multitude."²³ Not surprisingly, Jefferson fired Sargent as soon as he took office as president.

Sargent's problems as a territorial administrator were to a considerable extent the results of his formal style and cold demeanor. Also crucial was what critics called a "Puritan" insistence on high moral standards. But most significant was his stubborn refusal to accommodate local preferences and styles. Sargent, St. Clair, and their allies in the territory sought uniformity and regularity in human relationships. They had no tolerance for local idiosyncracies. On a general level, they expected citizens of the United States to behave in a calm and restrained manner, to put aside questions of personal honor or interest in favor of national glory. These former military officers saw themselves as a virtuous elite ("like Goths and Vandals" in Sargent's words) whose self-defined mission was to centralize authority in America, dictate correct behavior, and stamp out local deviations as portents of anarchy and chaos. "By encouraging Zeal in territorial officers we strengthen (it is believed) the general Arm," Sargent told John Adams in June 1800; "by discountenancing thereof we risk becoming the Botany Bay of America."²⁴

Many of St. Clair's strongest supporters in his fight with the Scioto Valley leaders were residents of Marietta, the principal town in the area purchased by the Ohio Company in 1787. By and large, the people who settled in that area were from eastern New England. But far more important for our understanding of political behavior in the territory was the degree to which their sense of how a society should function had been shaped by translocal experiences. Undoubtedly the most profound influence on the largely middle-aged leaders of the Ohio Company, including territorial judges Rufus Putnam, Samuel Holden Parsons, and James Varnum, had been the War for Independence. These were men whose experiences were national in scope, whose lives had been marked by service in the most cosmopolitan of eighteenth-century American institutions—the army. Their primary loyalty was to the national government,

²² William Dunbar to James Ross, May 23, 1799, quoted in J.F.H. Claiborne, *Mississippi as a Province, Territory, and State . . .*, 3 vols. (Jackson, Miss., 1880), I, 205.

²³ Sargent to John Marshall, Nov. 20, 1800, quoted in Toulmin, "Political Ideas of Winthrop Sargent," *Jour. Miss. Hist.*, XV (1953), 213. On Sargent's term as governor of Mississippi Territory see Robert V. Haynes, "The Formation of the Territory," in Richard Aubrey McLemore, ed., *A History of Mississippi*, 3 vols. (Hattiesburg, Miss., 1973), I, 174-216, and John Wunder, "American Law and Order Comes to Mississippi Territory: The Making of Sargent's Code, 1798-1800," *Jour. Miss. Hist.*, XXXVIII (1976), 131-156.

²⁴ Sargent to John Adams, June 20, 1800, in Carter, ed., *Territorial Papers*, V, 106.

particularly to President Washington. Years of wrangles, jealousies, and confusions had taught them that the foremost danger to the republic was parochialism—the subordination of the nation's general good to local interests and customs. Men such as St. Clair, Sargent, and Putnam were committed to the erection of overarching institutions that would impose harmony (as they defined it) on local chaos.²⁵

St. Clair also received a great deal of support in Cincinnati, the seat of Hamilton County. Founded in 1788 on land purchased from Congress by New Jersey judge John Cleves Symmes, Cincinnati quickly became the capital of the Northwest Territory. Its location made it the base for military operations against the Indians in the first half of the 1790s. The town was essentially a military outpost, and it rapidly acquired the character of a cosmopolitan center as men of diverse backgrounds passed through it on their way to battle or to sell supplies and liquor to the military. Although a significant number of its citizens came from New Jersey, Cincinnati was far from homogeneous.²⁶

Many of St. Clair's ardent supporters in Cincinnati were merchants, lawyers, or former officers. Like the associates of the Ohio Company, they gave their loyalty to something greater than a local region. Their experiences had been diverse, whether martial or commercial. They had encountered a wide range of people in their lives and put a premium on the power of strong institutions and firm leadership to maintain authority over and arbitrate among them. The lawyer Jacob Burnet, one of the staunchest Federalists in the territory and the son of a New Jersey doctor and congressman, sang the praises of institutionalized national authority throughout his life.²⁷

If St. Clair and his supporters tended to be middle-aged veterans of the War for Independence, the leaders of the opposition to the governor were almost all Virginians whose ties to each other derived from family and local connections.²⁸ They included the most significant leaders of early Ohio politics: Massie, Worthington (later a senator and governor), Tiffin (Ohio's first governor and subsequently a senator), William Henry Harrison (son-in-law of John Cleves Symmes, a territorial secretary, the first territorial delegate to Congress, and first governor of Indiana Territory, as well as ninth president of the United States), John Smith (a Cincinnati merchant and Baptist preacher who would serve as one of Ohio's first two senators), and Massie's brothers-in-law Charles Willing Byrd (territorial secretary and judge) and William Creighton (Ohio's first secretary of state). All were young and ambitious; several were talented. But their

²⁵ See the fuller discussion in Cayton, *Frontier Republic*, 12-50.

²⁶ Charles Theodore Greve, *The Centennial History of Cincinnati and Representative Citizens*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1904), I, 178, 366, 367, 376, 438; Bond, *Foundations of Ohio*, 295-300.

²⁷ Jacob Burnet, *Notes on the Early Settlement of the North-Western Territory* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1847).

²⁸ This point is developed in Barnhart, *Valley of Democracy*.

knowledge of the world was fairly parochial, limited to Virginia and its environs.

These were the men who became spokesmen for what Turnerians termed the democratic opposition to St. Clair, the fathers of an Ohio born in rhetorical denunciation of corruption and tyranny. Historians have pointed out the contradiction involved in such men leading a democratic revolution, arguing that they had no more intention of establishing an egalitarian society than did the Federalist territorial hierarchy.²⁹ These were hardly democratic men. But we understand them better if we look at them less as advocates of government by all the people than as initiators of a movement intended to extend the social and political world of colonial Virginia into the Northwest Territory. Such a goal did not involve transforming the whole region northwest of the Ohio River but rather shaping the areas that they owned in ways that were familiar. They were, above all else, Virginians committed to replicating Virginia.

Or, rather, replicating certain aspects of Virginia society, for most of the Virginia-bred leaders of the opposition to St. Clair were members of the gentry. Harrison and Byrd were scions of two of the most important families in the commonwealth; Massie and Worthington were sons of men of local property and influence. Politics in the Northwest Territory in the 1790s, whether Federalist or Jeffersonian, was a gentleman's game, and these men were decidedly gentlemen. They thought of themselves as a social elite who should command general respect. They had no intention of living on egalitarian terms with those below them. Rather, they wanted the life of the quintessential eighteenth-century Virginia gentleman—a goal most fully revealed in the careers of Massie and Worthington.

Nathaniel Massie was the oldest son of Nathaniel Massie, Sr., who owned a James River estate just above Richmond in Northam parish, Goochland County. The elder Massie, a grandson of Charles Massie who had migrated from Cheshire to New Kent around 1690, was a person of comfortable means and local influence. He served as justice of the peace, member of the Northam vestry, and militia captain during the War for Independence.

Born in 1763, the younger Massie spent his first twenty years in Goochland County. In 1783, armed with several letters of recommendation and the title to land owned by his father, he left for Kentucky, where he developed his skills as a surveyor and worked as an agent for James Wilkinson selling salt. He obtained appointment as deputy surveyor with Richard Anderson and in 1788 made his first trip across the Ohio River into the region reserved for Virginia's veterans. Bounded on the east by the Scioto River, on the west by the Little Miami, and on the south by the Ohio, the Virginia Military Tract was opened in 1790 for locating the warrants paid to the state's veterans. It was this area that made up the counties of Ross and Adams in 1798-1799. Massie became the principal

²⁹ Onuf, "From Constitution to Higher Law," *Ohio Hist.*, XCIV (1985), 5-33; Cayton, *Frontier Republic*.

surveyor and locator in the tract; by 1799, he owned vast amounts of land there.³⁰

Even the most cursory reading of Massie's correspondence demonstrates his well-honed acquisitive tendencies. There are no treatises about republican government in the Massie papers; indeed, there is little mention of politics at all. The correspondence consists largely of terse business letters between Massie and the men for whom he acted as land or business agent. If ever there was a man who knew how to take advantage of an economic opportunity, it was Nathaniel Massie.

The same is true of Thomas Worthington, Massie's friend and protégé. Worthington's background is similar to Massie's. Born in 1773, he, too, was the son of a Virginian of comfortable means and local influence. His grandfather was a Quaker emigrant from Cheshire who had arrived in New Jersey in 1712 and moved to the Shenandoah Valley in 1730. His father, Robert, became a justice of the peace, county coroner, and captain of the Frederick County militia. He worked as chain bearer for surveyor George Washington, served with him during the French and Indian War, and became a heavy speculator in lands in the Ohio Valley. On his death in 1774, he owned 2,170 acres west of Pittsburgh and claimed another 1,600 in what is now Columbiana County, Ohio. His \$200,000 estate included twenty slaves.³¹

Thomas Worthington, orphaned at age seven, had a lively youth. At fourteen, he went to live with Col. William Darke of Shepherdstown, whom he came to look on as an adopted father. Between 1791 and 1793 he worked as a common sailor on ships trading between the West Indies and Glasgow. When he returned to Shepherdstown, he put the several slaves he owned to farming the 1,466 acres left to him by his father and took up his father's penchant for speculation in lands in the Ohio Valley. In 1796 Worthington traveled to the Scioto Valley and decided to move there. He became a good friend of Nathaniel Massie and received his aid in locating land and obtaining militia and judicial appointments. In May 1797 Worthington left Virginia for the Ohio Country with his wife, daughter, and several relatives.³²

Like Massie, Worthington acquired a great deal of land in the Scioto Valley and became one of the leading economic men in the region. He, too, was an expert pursuer of the main chance. But what is ultimately most interesting about Massie and Worthington is not their acquisitive tendencies (what white man on the frontier did not have them?), but the

³⁰ David Meade Massie, *Nathaniel Massie, a Pioneer of Ohio: A Sketch of His Life* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1896), 14-17. The best study of the Virginia Military Tract is William T. Hutchinson, "Military Bounty Lands of the American Revolution in Ohio" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1927). See also Ellen S. Wilson, "Speculators and Land Development in the Virginia Military Tract: The Territorial Period" (Ph.D. diss., Miami University, 1982), and Jeffrey P. Brown, "Chillicothe's Elite: Leadership in a Frontier Community," *Ohio Hist.*, XCVI (1987), 140-156.

³¹ Sears, *Worthington*, 1-11.

³² *Ibid.*, 11-17.

assumptions and methods they brought to the intertwined enterprise of acquiring land and power.

At the center of their lives, as well as those of their fathers, was their status in their society—their understanding of who they were and where they stood in their community. For many Southerners, the key to social position was reputation, or what Bertram Wyatt-Brown has called “honor.” Ambitious Virginians thrived on *public* demonstrations of respect. Above all else they wanted their community to sanction and confirm their self-image as gentlemen.³³

In more concrete terms, the ownership of property (land or slaves) was the foundation of a man's reputation. Property ensured a Southerner's most prized possession—his independence. Late eighteenth-century Virginia gentlemen considered “freedom from entangling relationships with others and especially from debt,” as Jan Lewis has put it, “the precondition for a life of comfort and ease, a life free from trouble.”³⁴ But the ownership of large amounts of land worked by other people (slaves or tenants) did not justify a life of indolence. Rather, it gave white men both the time and the disinterestedness to be the social and political leaders of their society.

In colonial Virginia, personal independence had been secured by the cultivation of tobacco. But in the late eighteenth century, as tobacco planters became tangled in webs of debt and as wheat replaced tobacco as Virginia's crop of choice, men had to search for other forms of economic sustenance.³⁵ For some, such as Massie and Worthington, the entrepreneurial activity of land speculation was a means to economic independence with a minimum of physical labor. By accumulating massive amounts of land, Massie and Worthington could live indefinitely off the sales of small plots to individuals. They also attempted to develop mills, iron foundries, and distilleries, to grow crops such as corn and wheat, and to raise cattle and hogs—all of which would free them from the demands of daily economic existence.³⁶

³³ The centrality of honor has been emphasized by recent historians of the South. See Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982); Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th-Century American South* (New York, 1984); Elliott J. Gorn, “‘Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch’: The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry,” *American Historical Review*, XC (1985), 18-43; Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1982); and T. H. Breen, *Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of the Great Tidewater Planters on the Eve of Revolution* (Princeton, N.J., 1985). See also Charles S. Sydnor, “The Southerner and the Laws,” *Journal of Southern History*, VI (1940), 3-23.

³⁴ Lewis, *The Pursuit of Happiness: Family and Values in Jefferson's Virginia* (Cambridge, 1983), 108.

³⁵ Breen, *Tobacco Culture*, 180-182; Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1986), 118-161.

³⁶ Bernard Bailyn provides an excellent overview of speculators in *The Peopling of North America: An Introduction* (New York, 1986), 65-85. See also Hutchinson, “Bounty Lands,” and Wilson, “Speculators and Land Development.”

It is common for even the most sensitive of historians to see little more in western land speculation than the triumph of mobility, individualism, and money on the grand scale, with the undermining of "the obligations underpinning the ancient forms of community."³⁷ But one need not deny the entrepreneurial character of speculation to note that many Virginians perceived land speculation in the West as a means of recovering the economic independence associated with tobacco that seemed so crucial to the status of gentleman. Lots of land—property—would secure personal independence and public reputation. As T. H. Breen has suggested, "solvency would nurture personal autonomy; personal autonomy would assure integrity."³⁸

Massive land speculation also enabled men such as Massie and Worthington to influence the social development of the region in which they lived. Land speculation was more than profitable; it was a means of domination, and it was critical to a man's public image. Breen has written about the ways in which a gentleman's status was wrapped up in his ability to grow excellent tobacco—a process that required constant judgment and displays of skill. So, too, did land speculation. Few other activities involved such public demonstrations of individual judgment and talent. A man's economic success and his reputation in his community depended directly on his ability to select and develop the best available land.

The division of land in the Virginia Military Tract encouraged this relationship between private speculation and public status. Virginia had issued warrants for land in the tract to its veterans. In the 1790s some warrants were still held by soldiers or their heirs, but many had been sold. Surveyors such as Massie located, surveyed, and entered land for the holders of warrants. Unlike most of the rest of the Northwest Territory, the Virginia Military Tract was not surveyed into regular geometric patterns and divided into square townships. Instead, surveyors employed the "camelback survey" or "zigzag cut and carve" to lay out boundaries at discretion, following water courses and eliminating less desirable land. This kind of surveying made the surveyor or locator a very powerful man. Typically, he received one-fifth to one-half of the located land.³⁹

Men like Massie were amply rewarded for their expertise because the holders of warrants were completely dependent on their judgment, skills, and integrity. As Bernard Bailyn has written in describing the difficulties faced by absentee speculators, "successful land speculation required a minute knowledge of the land and a careful and continuing assessment of what kinds of people were likely to settle where."⁴⁰ Massie became the most successful locator in the Virginia Military Tract because of his reputation for being very good at what he did. Men felt they could put their trust in him.

³⁷ Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*. 312.

³⁸ Breen, *Tobacco Culture*. 185.

³⁹ Sears, *Worthington*. 17-18; Hutchinson, "Bounty Lands."

⁴⁰ Bailyn, *Peopling*. 80.

Massie worked hard to become what his associate John McDonald called "an expert woodsman." The locating of land was dangerous and difficult in a region that was without roads or white settlements and that was full of hostile Indians. Usually, surveyors worked in the dead of winter when they could count on meeting few Indians. According to McDonald, locators "were obliged to traverse the woods in every direction, guess at courses, and judge of distances" under miserable conditions. Massie "was admitted by all who knew his qualifications as a woodsman, to be of the first order. He could steer his course truly in clear or cloudy weather, and compute distances more correctly than most of the old hunters."⁴¹

Massie was also respected for his ability to handle men. He always took three assistant surveyors on his locating expeditions; each of the four had six men (a hunter, two chain men, a marker, a packhorse man, and a lookout). Massie won the regard of his men by mixing easily with them while exercising decisive leadership.

The lonely, dangerous surveying trips, which could last a month or more, fostered deep friendships. Massie and his men lived in a decidedly masculine culture. (Massie did not marry until he was thirty-seven, in 1800.) Work in the woods was sporadic, with a great deal of free time. Men spent "most of their time in hunting and fishing," enjoying "that happy state of indolence and ease, which none but the hunter or herdsmen can enjoy." Whiskey flowed freely in the evenings when the party sat around the campfire regaling each other with stories and songs. "When danger was not apparent or immediate, they were as merry a set of men as ever assembled." After the entertainment, they would sleep in small groups, wrapped in shared blankets for warmth, several hundred yards away from the fire to avoid being surprised by Indians. Years later, Massie would always welcome his companions to his home, offering them "hospitality" that "bordered on extravagance" (even if it included his wife's "foolish business" of serving tea with supper). The frequency with which men returned to visit Massie testified to their respect for him.⁴²

Worthington did not work as much as a surveyor or locator, but his future in the Scioto Valley also depended heavily on his ability to select the best lands. On his first trip to the region in 1796, he spent days wandering the woods and streams looking for prime locations. Later, a major part of his business consisted of trading tracts and acting as an agent for absentee landowners such as Albert Gallatin, James Ross, John Breckinridge, and Thomas Jefferson. Worthington was more restrained and less convivial than Massie, but his success, like Massie's, also depended to a significant degree on his reputation.⁴³

Throughout his life, Worthington was sensitive to public slights. In

⁴¹ John McDonald, *Biographical Sketches of General Nathaniel Massie, General Duncan McArthur, Captain William Wells, and General Simon Kenton* . . . (Dayton, Ohio, 1838), 16.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 33, 32, 47, 65. See also Gorn, "Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch," *AHR*, XC (1985), esp. 27-28, 35-42.

⁴³ Sears, *Worthington*, 13-15, 25.

1799, when St. Clair appointed the more experienced Samuel Finley colonel of the Ross County militia, the twenty-six-year-old Worthington abruptly resigned as lieutenant colonel, a position he had held for a year. Nothing St. Clair could say could dissuade him from the belief that he had been insulted.⁴⁴ Similarly, when critics accused him of corruption during his tenure as superintendent of public sales and register of land at Chillicothe from 1800 to 1802, the Virginian demanded a court trial and a public investigation. He was cleared of malfeasance but resigned anyway.⁴⁵ The point is that there was more to these incidents than frontier individualism or personal speculation. Worthington, like Massie, was a man to whom reputation was of supreme importance.

By the time of his death in 1813 Massie had acquired 75,825 acres and Worthington 18,273. These huge holdings—far more than their fathers had possessed—were part of a pattern of economic oligarchy that emerged in the Virginia Military Tract in the late 1790s.⁴⁶ But the economic positions of the two men did not rest solely on quantity of land. They had, of course, managed to appropriate the best lands. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, they constructed grist mills at waterfalls they controlled, monopolized salt licks, put sheep and cattle to grazing, and harvested corn and wheat for market in New Orleans. Both men attempted with limited success to introduce manufacturing to the Scioto Valley. Massie concentrated on iron while Worthington worked on cloth, using flax from his own fields and cotton purchased in Kentucky and New Orleans.⁴⁷

The two Virginians also spent a great deal of money in displaying their public importance. Neither man had any interest in living in a town. Instead, they built estates modeled on the world in which they had grown up. Massie had a modest wooden “mansion” constructed for his family near the falls of Paint Creek in Ross County.⁴⁸ Worthington invested in what some called the finest house west of the Appalachians. Designed by Benjamin Latrobe and built between 1805 and 1807, “Adena” was located about two miles northwest of Chillicothe. It was a fairly conventional example of the federal architectural style. The main house was two stories high with one-and-one-half story wings on either side and a terraced court in front. Formal gardens and orchards surrounded the home and outbuildings.⁴⁹

There were also servant quarters. After their migration across the Ohio, neither Massie nor Worthington owned slaves, but they did employ theoretically free blacks. A group of black “servants” accompanied Worthington and his family to the Northwest Territory. His daughter

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 36-37; “Executive Proceedings,” in Carter, ed., *Territorial Papers*, III, 81.

⁴⁵ Sears, *Worthington*, 39-43.

⁴⁶ Hutchinson, “Bounty Lands,” 197.

⁴⁷ Massie, *Massie*, 104; Sears, *Worthington*, 26-29.

⁴⁸ Massie, *Massie*, 65.

⁴⁹ Sears, *Worthington*, 30.

claimed that they stayed with the family out of personal loyalty. In any case, they worked as both domestic and field laborers. Massie also had black servants who were slaves in all but name; at least one was forcibly returned by authorities in Cincinnati when he tried to escape. Legally, Massie had no slaves; but in the delicate words of his admiring grandson, "a numerous retinue or retainers of many kinds and colors . . . took their place."⁵⁰

As Massie and Worthington tried to live like Virginia gentry, they placed the county court at the center of their political sphere. "No institution was more central to Tidewater Virginia culture," according to A. G. Roeber. Appointment as a justice of the peace certified high socioeconomic position: it was the political expression of status. In Virginia, justices were nominally appointed by the governor. In reality, the courts themselves filled vacant positions, maintaining the dignity and power of one family or recognizing the rising influence of another.⁵¹ Justices participated in the adjudication of economic practices and social customs as well as legal controversies. The county court enforced "a host of statutes purposefully drawn broadly to give the justices wide-ranging discretionary powers over nearly every aspect of local life." Its functions were administrative as well as judicial and included control of almost all local patronage. The justices, simply put, were the most powerful men in their area.⁵²

In the largest sense, as Rhys Isaac has argued, the courts were "central to the organization of society." They protected the law, which was the definition of "rights and obligations." More specifically, "rights meant property—above all in land and slaves." As the guardians of property, the courts were the key to the "effective independence of persons." Without control over their property—justified and regulated by the authority of the law—the positions of gentlemen were vulnerable to all kinds of challenges.⁵³ The courts, then, were the primary institutions through which powerful men in Virginia maintained the status quo. To lose control of them was to lose control of property, then autonomy, then reputation—

⁵⁰ Sarah Anne Worthington Peter, *Private Memoir of Thomas Worthington* (Cincinnati, 1882), 31-33; Anna Shannon McAllister, *In Winter We Flourish: Life and Letters of Sarah Worthington King Peter, 1800-1877* (New York, 1939), 19-20; Charles Willing Byrd to Massie, May 4, June 13, 1801, Nathaniel Massie Papers, Ohio Hist. Soc.; Massie, *Massie*, 106. See also Edward Tiffin to Worthington, Mar. 7, 1798, Worthington Papers. Telling Worthington that he was ready to leave Charles Town for the territory, Tiffin wrote that "my things and Black family could go on as I have a fine young Fellow 'Anthony' who I could entrust with my concerns untill I overtook them."

A useful recent discussion of slavery in the Northwest Territory is Paul Finkelman, "Slavery and the Northwest Ordinance: A Study in Ambiguity," *Journal of the Early Republic*, VIII (1986), 343-370.

⁵¹ Roeber, "Authority, Law, and Custom: The Rituals of Court Day in Tidewater Virginia, 1720 to 1750," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XXXVII (1980): 29-52 (quotation on p. 30).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵³ Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 94, 93.

in other words, the whole world. Government existed as far as the Southern white was concerned primarily to protect a man's property, "by which honor was sustainable."⁵⁴

Courts were just as powerful in the western parts of Virginia. In Kentucky, except for the years between 1792 and 1799, county justices exercised control of patronage, local roads, elections, and the implementation of acts of the state legislature. Courts filled their own vacancies, typically with prosperous and distinguished citizens, so that the bench reflected and buttressed the power structure.⁵⁵

Thus it was vitally important to men such as Massie and Worthington to be justices of the peace. To be sure, the position gave them power over the economic development of the region. It was also crucial to their sense of position in the community, their sense of personal honor and public reputation. Service on the county court simultaneously gave and ratified power. Above all, it was the most important public indicator of public esteem.

In many ways, then, Massie and Worthington worked hard to reproduce the kind of world in which they had grown up. They tried to become Ohio versions of their fathers, men of economic position who commanded deference, men of local influence who prominently displayed their standing in society, men of personal honor and pride in being Virginian above all else. When the usually mild-mannered William Henry Harrison, son of a governor of Virginia, heard a fellow army officer in Cincinnati attack "the Republican . . . members of Congress," he demanded that the man make "an exception of the Virginia delegation." After a shouting match and a near brawl, the man apologized.⁵⁶ Biographers have recounted this incident to show that the young Harrison was a Jeffersonian Republican. But what it demonstrates more than anything else is that Harrison was a *Virginian*. He demanded an apology for an insult to his state, not to a political faction.

Given this larger context, it is clear why the fight over the location of the seat of Adams County triggered such an outcry. St. Clair's charge that Massie was self-interested in seeking to locate the seat struck at the core of the Virginian's self-image as well as his economic interests. Whether it was true was not the issue. It embarrassed him in front of his neighbors; it called his judgment into question. It was, in short, a public insult.⁵⁷

So, too, did St. Clair's attacks on the authority of local justices challenge

⁵⁴ Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 72. See also Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 31-33.

⁵⁵ Robert M. Ireland, *The County Courts in Antebellum Kentucky* (Lexington, Ky., 1972), esp. 3; Joan Wells Coward, *Kentucky in the New Republic: The Process of Constitution Making* (Lexington, Ky., 1979), esp. 5-6. Coward argues that Kentucky's county court system was similar to Virginia's but does not believe that justices were men of any particular economic or social standing in their communities. See also Mary K. Bonsteel Tachau, *Federal Courts in the Early Republic: Kentucky, 1789-1816* (Princeton, N.J., 1978).

⁵⁶ Deposition of Griffin Yeatman, *Cincinnati Gazette*, July 15, 1840.

⁵⁷ Worthington to St. Clair [draft], 1798, Worthington Papers.

the ways in which Massie and Worthington assumed that power ought to be exercised. The governor's assertion of his right to overrule the justices ran counter to decades of tradition as well as personal interests. It was an assault on the very heart of the interlocked economic and political structures of eighteenth-century Virginia. No wonder, then, that on receiving a copy of St. Clair's letter denouncing the movement of the seat to Manchester, Worthington fired off two letters to the governor defending his behavior. St. Clair replied that he had not intended to say that the judges' actions sprang from "improper motives." But Worthington was not mollified.⁵⁸

St. Clair's actions, moreover, fit the pattern that many Southerners, especially Virginians, found in nationalist schemes such as the Constitution to deprive the South of power and influence.⁵⁹ They were wise to have such fears. The governor did not veto the location of the Adams County seat or remove Massie as justice because he was tyrannical or whimsical. He acted as he did in order to assert the power of the territorial government and to ensure cultural homogeneity north of the Ohio River. As a nationalist, St. Clair was vitally interested in some sort of regional integration in the United States. To allow Virginia a foothold in the nationally controlled region north of the Ohio would undermine that vision.

St. Clair thus acted partly to preserve his authority and that of his government. He wanted to demonstrate his ability to suppress the dangerous, anarchic spirits of selfishness and localism. But he was acting against Virginia. While historians have been quick to point out the distaste of St. Clair and his associates for "frontier democracy" and localism, they have not noted the degree to which the territorial hierarchy linked the supposedly anarchic spirit of democracy and potential disloyalty to the Union with the states of Virginia and Kentucky. The governor, for example, worried in an often-quoted December 1799 letter to Senator James Ross that a government formed by "a multitude of indigent and ignorant people . . . too far removed from the seat of government to be much impressed with the power of the United States" would be "more troublesome and more opposed to the measures of the United States than even Kentucky."⁶⁰ Two years earlier, territorial secretary Winthrop Sargent had repressed doubts about "the national Attachment of the people from the Indian Line quite up to the new England Settlements upon Ohio Company lands [that is, the Scioto Valley]—many of them, are

⁵⁸ St. Clair to Worthington, July 29, 1798, *ibid.*

⁵⁹ Drew R. McCoy, "James Madison and Visions of National Identity in the Confederation Period: A Regional Perspective," in *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity*, Richard Beeman, Stephen Botein, and Edward C. Carter II, eds. (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1987), 244.

⁶⁰ St. Clair to Ross, Dec. 1799, in Smith [ed.], *St. Clair Papers*, II, 482.

not the *very best* of a neighbouring State [Kentucky] of Doubtful politics."⁶¹

Such remarks are more easily understood if we remove them from both the traditional Turnerian obsession with democracy versus aristocracy and the argument that frontiersmen were all economic men and place them instead in the contexts of regional conflict and national politics. Drew R. McCoy has suggested that "the tendency everywhere in the 1780s was to view the West as overwhelmingly an extension of the South."⁶² In the late 1790s, the Federalist patrons of St. Clair and Sargent were involved in what seemed to be a serious power struggle that threatened the Union. Territorial officials saw themselves engaged less in a fight against democracy than in an effort to control the power of Virginia and what they saw as the insidious spirit of localism represented by the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions. *That* was why Sargent, in September 1798, celebrated the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts and the fact "that the old and illustrious Commander of our Armies, has again resumed the sword, and his Example has been followed, by a whole Train of Worthies."⁶³ *That* was what St. Clair had in mind when he worried in 1800 that Massie was "a little tintured by democracy,"⁶⁴ that there was too much "littleness of mind and an improper attachment to local interests" in the legislature,⁶⁵ and that the Ross County "democrats" would have "the power and influence . . . to model [Ohio] as they please," which would be "in a manner as unfriendly to the United States as possible."⁶⁶

Throughout his tenure as governor, St. Clair worried about separatist movements taking root among unruly frontiersmen. But by the late 1790s, what he feared even more was the possibility that Virginians would ultimately define the political order of the Ohio Valley.

In the end, something more than a fight between localists and nationalists or a debate over the nature of republican government was at work in the struggle for power that began as a tiff over the Adams County seat. What was at issue was whether the traditional, *local* society of Virginia and the revolutionary *national* one envisioned by Federalist territorial officials would coexist in the Northwest Territory. The participants were so vehement in their arguments because their fight made explicit the usually

⁶¹ Sargent to the Secretary of State, Aug. 14, 1797, in Carter, ed., *Territorial Papers*, II, 622.

⁶² McCoy, "James Madison and Visions of American Nationality," in Beeman *et al.*, eds., *Beyond Confederation*, 233. See also Joseph L. Davis, *Sectionalism in American Politics, 1774-1787* (Madison, Wis., 1977); Linda K. Kerber, *Federalists in Dissent: Imagery and Ideology in Jeffersonian America* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1970), 23-66.

⁶³ Sargent to Andrew Ellicott, Sept. 10, 1798, in Dunbar Rowland, ed., *The Mississippi Territorial Archives . . .* (Nashville, Tenn., 1905), 45-46.

⁶⁴ St. Clair to John Adams, Mar. 30, 1800, in Smith [ed.], *St. Clair Papers*, II, 485.

⁶⁵ "The Governor's Reply to the Answer of the House of Representatives," Nov. 17, 1800, *ibid.*, 514.

⁶⁶ St. Clair to James Ross, Dec. 1799, *ibid.*, 483.

implicit link between personal interest and social organization by revealing a fundamental lack of consensus about what made men important and powerful. To be sure, individual concerns about land and reputation motivated the behavior of everyone involved. But the initial, petty squabbles inevitably and logically grew into arguments over the great question of how land and reputation ought to be acquired and maintained: the most basic issue was control over the power to define the values of a new world.

Thus Worthington and Massie, in defending themselves against the perceived insults of St. Clair, were something other or more than democratic frontiersmen or greedy speculators. They were representatives of the white, male, Southern tradition that linked the rhetoric of localism and populism to the defense of inequality and honor. In short, they were true to the mentality that had led Virginians to war in the 1770s and would lead them there again in the 1860s.⁶⁷ At bottom, popular sovereignty was more a means to an end—unfettered control of their local society—than an end in itself.

But leading Virginians in the territory were Southern gentlemen; how, then, do we explain their triumph in a frontier society composed of different kinds of people, many of whom were unenamored of either Virginia or gentlemen? The answer may lie in seeing the frontier of the early republic in a different way, one that builds on discussions of cultural interaction between Indians and whites by examining significant differences among white settlers, especially the interaction among people from New England, the Middle Atlantic states, and the various regions of the South that would dominate nineteenth-century Midwestern politics.⁶⁸

The key to political success in an area where no group was truly dominant was a policy of laissez-faire and an aggressive assault on anything that smacked of overarching control. Victory went not to the men with the best-laid plans but to those who preached the gospel of leaving everyone alone—in this case, the Jeffersonian Republican coalition put together by Worthington and Tiffin. The beauty of the Ohio constitution was the way in which it decentralized government into the hands of local leaders. Settlers in Ross and Adams counties could manage their affairs as they saw fit; so, too, could those in Marietta or the Miami Valley or the Western Reserve. The Virginians who led the statehood movement did not intend to make Ohio as a whole into Virginia. They simply wanted the freedom to run their part of the state in ways that were familiar to them.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975); Breen, *Tobacco Culture*; Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*.

⁶⁸ William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856* (New York, 1987), 428-431.

⁶⁹ See the fuller discussion in Cayton, *Frontier Republic*, 81-109, and Andrew R. L. Cayton and Peter S. Onuf, *The Midwest and the Nation: Rethinking the History of an American Region* (Bloomington, Ind., 1990), 65-83. For more general comments on the coalitional nature of the Jeffersonian Republicans see Steven

When we understand this, when we can make out the culturally derived misperceptions and misinterpretations that were the tangled roots of political behavior on the Ohio frontier, we can more fully appreciate the overheated rhetoric that the Turnerians took so literally and that many subsequent historians have dismissed. Because the American settlement of the Old Northwest involved the struggle of peoples born and bred in different places to come to terms with each other and with themselves, because it involved a collision of divergent conceptions of the ways in which a society ought to function and its members ought to behave, it produced a world of violence and volatility, of excesses and exaggerations. But if contemporary Eastern and European observers (and many historians) found the Ohio Country unruly, it was only because they were seeing a society in the process of formation, a society taking shape at the cultural crossroads of the early American republic.

Watts, *The Republic Reborn: War and the Making of Liberal America, 1790-1820* (Baltimore, 1987), 329-331.